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ABSTRACT

The purpose of a phenomenological study was to understand what impact heteronormativity has on a lesbian teacher's perception of her instructional style, content, and context of curriculum taught. Through taped interviews with nine lesbian educators teaching in the K-12 programs in Florida's Dade, Broward, and Miami-Dade counties, this study examined the personal experiences of lesbian teachers. The framework for the study included theories related to historical, sociocultural, and psychosocial development; while the methodology included a qualitative design using primary elements of a phenomenological study. The themes characterized the coming-out process of a lesbian, which directly paralleled the personal development and influenced the professional development of the lesbian educator: (1) self-acknowledgment; (2) self-identification; (3) coming-out to other lesbians by overcoming fear and establishing relationships; and (4) coming-out to others. The results of this study showed that the acceptance of being a lesbian, shared with the acknowledgment, rather than compliance or defiance, of cultural hegemony allows the lesbian educator to develop a curriculum and a classroom climate that fosters understanding, and generates social change among colleagues, parents, and students, one person at a time. (Contains 15 references, 1 table, and 3 figures.) (Author/BT)

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Heteronormativity and Teaching:

A Phenomenological Study of Lesbian Teachers

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AERA Chicago Conference

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand what impact "heteronormativity" has on a lesbian teacher's perception of her instructional style, content, and context of curriculum taught. Through taped interviews with nine lesbian educators, this research examined the lived experience of the lesbian teacher.

The framework for this study included theories related to historical, sociocultural, and psychosocial development while the methodology included a qualitative design using primary elements of a phenomenological study. The themes characterized the coming out process of a lesbian, which directly paralleled the personal development and influenced the professional development of the lesbian educator: (a) self-acknowledgement; (b) self-identification; (c) coming out to other lesbians by overcoming fear and establishing relationships; (d) coming out to others.

The results of this study showed that the acceptance of being a lesbian, shared with the acknowledgement, rather than compliance or defiance, of cultural hegemony can allow the lesbian educator to develop a curriculum and a classroom climate that will foster understanding and even generate social change among colleagues, parents, and students, one person at a time.

Heteronormativity and Teaching: A Phenomenological Study of Lesbian Teachers

> I think that's life. You're "normal" if you're straight. You're "abnormal" if you're not. Nobody asks you, "Are you straight?" They ask, "Are you gay? Are you whatever?" Yeah, and I think that's in school too. People either respect me or they think I'm straight...the norm. Unfortunately, and even we have labeled ourselves. How many of us have sat around and said, "It's not that I'm not normal, I just don't fit the norm"? That bothers me. I think everything's geared towards heterosexuality. Don't you? (Bailey, a lesbian teacher).

In most schools, a lesbian is not part of a minority. She is not even worthy of mention in a discussion on diversity, because she is not normal. Being African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Caucasian, short, tall, gifted, and physically or mentally challenged are all becoming the focus for equal acceptance in classrooms throughout the country. Teaching students to not only accept but to celebrate diversity has become mandatory in all textbooks and curriculums. However, for many gay and lesbian teachers, as well as their students, exclusion from growing considerations for diversity carries not only the burden of "heterosexism," (the presumption that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality), but also inherently assumes "heteronormativity," completely rejecting the possibility that homosexuality is worthy of any consideration whatsoever, because it is not "normal."

The perception of what is normal can be derived from a variety of sources that wield the power that is assigned by those willing to accept the authority of these sources. While the fourth edition (1994) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* compiled by the American Psychiatric Association does not define "homosexuality" as abnormal (unless the patient is overly distressed about his or her sexual orientation), the prevailing perception of "normal" does not concur with this powerful authority. It is social hegemony, "the power and privilege that are maintained through implicit, unquestioning acceptance of 'the way things are'" (Gramsci, 1985) that supports "heteronormativity," and the implication that "homosexuality" is the unnatural opposite.

In schools, the emphasis on embracing diversity, which is impossible to ignore given the cultural constitution of South Florida in particular, has been an attempt to change public perception through education. Interestingly, students have become a source of information for their parents and it is through them that shifts in accepted beliefs are occurring. Again, even though historical events are shaping the lives of the gay and lesbian community, it is the shift in some authoritative beliefs in what is "normal" that is having the greatest impact (Harbeck, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Sanlo, 1999; Woog, 1995).

Previous studies

While all the literature reviewed contained valuable information for guidance and clarification in this study, six books and articles, in particular, stood out as examples of the theoretical underpinnings most associated with research on lesbian educators. Table 1 presents a summary of theoretical frameworks for these studies on gay and lesbian teachers, identifying each author with the theories they explored, the issues that characterized their study, along with their findings and how these studies specifically apply to lesbian teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand what impact "heteronormativity" had on a lesbian teacher's perception of her instructional style, content, and context of curriculum taught. It was designed to answer the following questions: How does being a lesbian impact a professional relationship with colleagues and students? Why does a lesbian teacher choose to "come out" or "stay in the closet" to colleagues and/or students? What influence does being a lesbian have on course content and classroom behavior? My choice to study lesbian teachers was certainly influenced by the fact that my friend is a lesbian teacher, but also as a female teacher myself, I was interested in studying this group with which I may have been working for twenty-eight years, but of which I had no understanding.

Table 1
Summary of Theoretical Frameworks for Studies on Gay and Lesbian Teachers

Author	Theory	Issue	Findings	Application to Lesbian Teachers
Harbeck (1992)	Historical Sociocultural Development	How historical events and ideas influence future social perceptions and legal rights.	The legal history pertaining to gay and lesbian issues has been a reflection of social perception of religious and political groups. This has a tremendous effect on the employment of lesbian and gay teachers. Education of individuals is key to protecting a career position.	For lesbian teachers, success in employment comes with educating individually those with whom they come into contact about gay and lesbian issues.
Sanlo (1999)	Historical Sociocultural Development	How experiences of lesbian and gay teachers affect their roles in the educational process.	Gays and lesbians in North Florida feel unsupported by social systems, administrators, parents, and therefore, are unable to transcend their own fear to assist gay and lesbian students. Change will not occur until the silence is broken.	For lesbian teachers, fear that results from lack of support will silently pass along to the next generation of educators.
Griffin, Pat (1992)	Psychosocial Development	How lesbian and gay teachers are empowered by coming out.	Teachers move on a scale from separation to integration within the school community. Six categories lie between fear and self-integrity: totally closeted, passing, covering, implicitly out, explicitly out, publicly out. Totally closeted is extreme of separation while publicly out is the highest integration in the school community.	For lesbian teachers, empowerment can be achieved by coming out.

Continued on the next page

Table 1 (continued)
Summary of Theoretical Frameworks for Studies on Gay and Lesbian Teachers

Author	Theory Explored	Issue	Findings	Application to Lesbian Teachers
Khayatt (1992)	Historical Psychosocial	How lesbian teachers manage their sexual identity within the context of school, classroom, and society.	As long as lesbian teachers conform to normative standards and do not make their sexual identity an issue, they may be tolerated in a historically heterosexual society.	For lesbian teachers, understanding the sources of fear within the heterosexual society requires an examination of the long history of patriarchal heterosexuality.
Kissen (1997)	Psychosocial Development	How lesbian and gay teachers risk personal and professional danger to pursue their career.	Even within schools and communities rife with homophobia, lesbian and gay teachers are willing to risk danger to pursue a vocation they love. Many are even creating avenues of assistance for their gay and lesbian students. Support groups are key to alleviating fear and fostering understanding.	For lesbian teachers, finding support groups within both the gay/lesbian and straight communities can strengthen personal and social understanding heading to establishing a "safe" working environment.
Mayer (1993)	Psychosocial Development	How gay and lesbian teachers accept selves and others in a comparison between them and straight teachers.	In a questionnaire that posed research questions relating to acceptance of self and others, there was no significant difference in the answers of gay / lesbian and heterosexual participants	For lesbian teachers, as for heterosexual teachers, acceptance of self and others holds the same importance.

While few would question the positive influence of skilled educators on their students, many do question what kind of influence is exerted by the lesbian teacher. Often those opposing same-sex relationships correlate lesbian teachers with substandard skills in instructional style, content, or context of curriculum taught. Studying the "lived" experiences of lesbian educators and their perceptions of how their sexual orientation influences their teaching puts a face on and gives a voice to those who are both victims and manifestations of fear. It is important to education that the talents of any teachers, regardless of their sexual orientation, are not negated through misunderstanding, particularly from their peers. Good and Brophy (1995) in discussing how the school environment can affect an instructor's performance cite Rosenholtz's (1989) study which revealed that "the social structure of the workplace can vary remarkably from school to school and that the social organization in which teaching takes place significantly affects teachers' commitment, leadership, cooperation, and the quality of both teachers' and students' school lives and thus, overall school effectiveness" (p. 418). In this way the perceptions exhibited by others can influence the performance of lesbian teachers. The *Harvard Law Review* divided society's attitude towards homosexuality into four perspectives: (a) the sin perspective that focuses on its immorality, (b) the illness perspective that suggests it is a curable disease, (b) the neutral perspective that characterizes it as a difference not worthy of discrimination, and finally (d) the special construct perspective that defines it as normal human sexuality (Sanlo, 1999). At the beginning of this research I would have characterized my perspective to be in the third category partly because of my friendship with my colleague who was an exceptional teacher, but primarily because the readings in the literature I reviewed made me realize that there may have been several excellent teachers with whom I had worked that I did not know were lesbians. This discovery would not have changed the fact that they were outstanding educators.

Theoretical Framework

My framework for this study was based upon that for a phenomenological study in the style of Clark Moustakas (1994) as described in *Phenomenological Research Methods* and further characterized in John Creswell's (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research: Choosing Among Five Traditions.* Another important focus of my study was the general assumption of what is "normal" as explored in such articles as Evan's (1999) "'Are You Married?': Examining Heteronormativity in Schools." The term "heteronormativity" identifies the phenomenon of assuming heterosexuality that is characterized in the single question, "Are you married?" In familiarizing myself with vocabulary and literature about others' perceptions of the nature of being a lesbian, I felt more equipped to explore what Moustakas (1994) characterizes as "lived experiences... important to people as conscious human beings" (Creswell, 1998, p. 236).

Pilot Study

To prepare for my research I conducted a pilot study with four participants. I was very fortunate to have my friend, who will later be referred to as Scout, as a "gatekeeper" for participants in this study, most of whom are members of GLSEN, for which Scout is an active member. I attended a meeting and made a general invitation to any lesbian teachers who would agree to be interviewed and Scout also spoke to several women whom she knew and thought would be interesting for this study.

In the pilot study, Scout and three other lesbian teachers with whom she was familiar through GLSEN workshops were interviewed. Each participant was given a list of the interview questions and signed an interview consent form which explained that pseudonyms would be used and all transcripts would be submitted to each for corrections and approval. The actual interviews usually lasted two hours and were conducted in a setting chosen by the interviewee.

After I conducted and transcribed the four interviews that comprised my pilot

study, I used a process of color coding themes and found they fell into four categories. They included (a) self-acknowledgment, (b) naming self, (c) coming out to other lesbians, and (d) coming out to others. After studying these themes, I was able to generate a model which characterizes the steps in the process through which all lesbians, and certainly those who are educators, must go through in order to achieve personal and professional success.

Figure 1. Steps in the "Coming Out" Process.

Each step is a prerequisite for the next, but reaching the final stage does not end the process. There is no true final step to be achieved, rather like Sisyphus pushing a rock to the top of a hill only to have it roll back down. Although reaching the top level of "coming out to others" gave each lesbian teacher a feeling of freedom in her accomplishment, all acknowledged that it was not an achievement that ended at a pinnacle, but rather required a monthly, weekly, or even daily affirmation.

While the pilot study clarified the process of personal achievement in reaching "coming out to others," I wanted to focus more on how this process affected the professional lives of lesbian educators, particularly in their teaching style and content and context of their curriculum. Teachers represented in previous studies generally complied with social hegemony, even to the point of questioning their places in a school community that embraced "heteronormativity." The women I interviewed in my pilot study were far more confident in their abilities to reach their

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optimum productivity and creativity as teachers. I felt that conducting a study at the present time within the South Florida "climate" would yield different information about the impact of "coming out" on a lesbian educators teaching experience than that previously researched. Although the women in my pilot study were either "out" or partially "out," it would have been harmful to future participants to make any assumptions about their "out" status that would put them in personal or professional danger. My model was now two-fold in its relevance to this study: first, as a tool for organizing and categorizing data collected from interviews and secondly, as an opportunity to test it as a credible guide for assessing what stage of development each educator interviewed had achieved. All participants in the subsequent study were shown this model and agreed to its validity in their personal experience.

Method

In continuing this research, I decided to interview a total of ten women. I wanted teachers who represented white, African-American, and Hispanic ethnic groups teaching within the K-12 program. The difficulty of finding women willing to speak freely on personal issues made Scout's role invaluable. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, "snowballing" or "chain sampling" made the best sense in finding participants for this study. My intention in the study that followed the pilot was to include a wider range of participants in terms of age, teaching experience, grade levels taught, and ethnic diversity. Again, because of the nature of the study, "snowballing" was the most effective way to obtain a larger and more diverse sample of participants, while still maintaining their personal feelings of safety.

The interviews were scheduled according to the availability and convenience of those willing to participate. When neither Scout nor I were able to find a willing African-American to participate in this study, I asked colleagues and those I had previously interviewed to make general inquiries. I wished to keep my research representative of South Florida and its unique

environment, which is generally regarded as more gay-and- lesbian-tolerant than most of Florida. Even so, I was unable to find a willing participant of color within the tri-county area. Similarly, Jennings (1994) noted difficulty of finding willing black participants to interview in his study, identifying fear of additional prejudice as a factor.

The teachers who were interviewed taught in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties, and in all cases, I met them at an agreed-upon location. Four out of the nine interviews were conducted at the homes of the women and Scout was present at least partially for all of these. Others took place at restaurants or school buildings. All women signed informed consent forms to assure their anonymity and I asked each to give me a name of a pet that I might use to represent her name. I decided to provide the exploratory questions to the participants before the interview as a guideline, which helped the interviews generally remain conversational and reflective, following the natural discussion flow of the participant in order for her to tell her story unhindered by a restrictive structure, but still allow my questions to be answered. I used a small tape recorder to document the interviews, which usually lasted two hours. This process turned out to be very successful. Probably related to their experience as educators, the participants made it a point to address all the written questions without my asking them

My connection to these women as a female educator was essential to the success of this qualitative study, as it allowed me to achieve an instant mutual understanding of their professional issues. Nevertheless, by virtue of my membership in the hegemonic heterosexual world, it was important that I clarified my personal beliefs. Again, *The Harvard Law Review* (1990) characterized my initial reaction towards homosexuality as "the neutral perspective, which views homosexuality as a difference from which one should not experience discrimination" (Sanlo, 1999, p.10). My role as a straight educator interviewing lesbian teachers was also important to this process, as my lack of experience in their personal issues allowed me

to more easily "bracket" any preconceived ideas and distill the prevailing themes. As an educator, I gained their trust. As educators, they gained my respect.

Findings

The participants in this study represented varying levels of being "out of the closet."

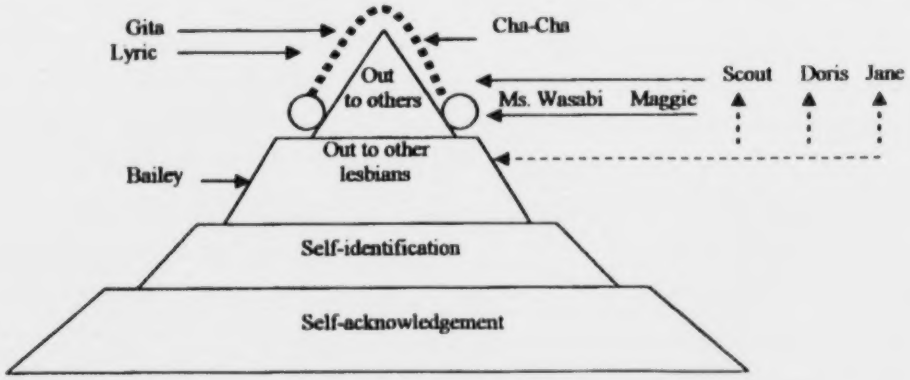

Figure 2. Participants' level achieved in "coming out" process within the duration of this study.

Many moved from one step to another through the course of this research. Subsequent to this study, many of the participants enjoyed professional success after coming out to their colleagues, although one occurrence was not necessarily the result of the other. However, as educators who were out of the closet, they were able to enjoy the accolades of several honors and did not have to indulge in feelings of anxiety or fear over the possibility of exposure.

Cha-Cha, Doris, and Scout have most actively involved themselves assisting students and their parents in understanding gay and lesbian issues. They have served as advisors to administrators, counselors, and other teachers in order to assist in sensitivity training. However, while they are willing to use being "out" to help others, most would still rather be regarded solely for their teaching expertise.

> Scout- For me personally, I'm very comfortable with the fact that so many of my colleagues know that I'm gay and I'm very comfortable with the fact that so many kids know. I've been fortunate and I've never been harmed. I haven't had bad words painted on my car, but I think that thing that I always think about is the two or three kids in my

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> class who are questioning who they are. I would love for them to be able to look back and say, "I know somebody who's gay who's not a monster." And I feel that same way too for the straight kids for them to able to say, "Oh, my English teacher was gay and she was OK." I feel as though I'm serving a larger purpose that way.

Even Gita, who at seventy, has experienced a lifetime of "coming out" events, was most adamant about the importance of rejecting "the closet" and yet remained cautious about the subsequent consequences associated with the momentary freedom. However, her own bitter-sweet experiences still led her in favor of disclosure.

> Gita- I think that you cannot be healthy unless you are out of the closet. Yourself, and your first obligation is to yourself. And yes, there's a price to pay, but the price to me is lost in the cost of staying in the closet . So to me, I urge teachers to come out of the closet, for themselves, for their mental health...I guess I do have a negative emotional feeling toward people who are closeted everywhere, but part of it is because it does a number on their character and personality. It really does. It dampens their ardor, their *joie de vivre*. The spontaneity, it's not there. The freedom, the lightness. They're not light.

By coming out and revealing their personal culture, these teachers have been able to more comfortably guide their students in accepting all cultures, including the prevailing one. The problem that women found with heteronormativity was not that heterosexuality was "wrong" as a social relation of the sexes, but rather that it did not, in their view, represent the only normal relationship.

Doris, who comes from a family of nine children including one gay brother, found it to be a long and difficult journey to "coming out," but subsequently to making this choice, she was named "teacher of the year" for her county. While she did not specifically attribute her success to "coming out," Doris did acknowledge that she would not have had the confidence to pursue these honors if she were not free from the fear that formerly kept her closeted.

> Doris- It's all a person's comfort level and what they can handle. I mean here I am in South Florida which is such a mecca, but I wasn't ready to come out. I couldn't do it, but it was eating at me. I mean, this is my thirteen or fourteenth year teaching, so it has taken me this long to be OK with it. When I first started teaching, I wasn't out...I always felt that I had to be one step better than anybody else.... I'm not trying to shove it down

> anybody's throat, but I'm not going to let anybody use it against me because I used it against myself for so many years, but I'm out. I'm definitely a better teacher.

A lesbian educator has the same primary task as all other educators: teaching her students. Acknowledging and respecting human diversity is a character issue that has become a focus that those who dictate national, state, and county course content have included in all curricula. Lesbian teachers who have lived under the conditions of heteronormativity in a state of "imposed normality" are sensitive to the needs of their students, but are tentative on how to approach their problems. Straight students, who are uncaring or unaware of the impact of their speech and behavior, require as much attention as those who are the targets of their intolerance. The lesbian educator, even if she is out, walks a fine line in an effort to maintain the perception of being fair and free from her own prejudice. Maintaining this position and being empathetic towards students who are wrestling with their sexuality and are trying to articulate their conflicts can be difficult, particularly for a gay or lesbian teacher who has already faced this crossroad.

> Cha-Cha- You know it's a tough call. Two summers ago my principal calls me and he said, "I need to talk with you. It's about one of our students. He's left our school and he's gotten into drugs and he's not going to school and I'm really concerned and I don't know what to do about it ." And so I called the kid up and said, "OK. We gotta talk. Do you mind if I talk to you about a few things?" He said, "OK. I'm scared. I'm getting beat up." I'm really scared and my friends won't have anything to do with me anymore."
>
> I took him up to Compass, [our gay-lesbian community center] got him some counseling. Found him a whole new group of friends to hang out with, got him into the school of the arts. He just like kind of turned around and the only thing being, the principal knew he couldn't talk to him...a man principal, a man teacher couldn't talk to him and I just did and I was so glad.

For the majority of these educators, the most important part of their "coming out" process is that it has enabled them to help their students. While living in fear of exposure, these teachers felt that even if they were not outright lying about themselves, there was a certain dishonesty that pervaded their personal and professional existence. They cared for their students in the same manner as other colleagues, but some felt it necessary to remain more aloof, more removed to

keep safe. The women who are out to their schools have felt empowered to exert the kind of encouragement, caring, and discipline necessary to educate their students in a manner that would be supported by the "norms" established by most authorities: school board, administration, parents, colleagues. However, they also have the freedom to educate their students socially to understand the similarities in those who would appear to be different and to apply this understanding in their personal lives.

The women in this study all expressed that teachers are generally expected to be role models and they have a captive audience. They discussed how essential it is for them to use their power in the classroom to help their students enrich their own lives and how this responsibility weighs heavily upon these teachers.

> Ms. Wasabi- I think teachers can love students and set examples well enough to overcome the damage. On the same note, I think some teachers can be a detriment in the classroom. But yes, I think that it is within every teacher's domain to, if anything, allow students the portals of information so that they can find their own way. If you tell a child, "You are gifted. Find that gift," then hopefully that student or individual will look inside themselves and maybe realize there's better you can do for the world than to share that gift. So yes, I definitely think that teachers are empowered. They see it all the time with great leaders at least to inspire students to be who they are.

Sensitivity to students, in general, is a powerful tool for the teacher. However, preventing students from calling one another "gay," especially for the teacher who is a lesbian but in the closet, often does not yield satisfactory results.

> Bailey- I know that in my classes, other than keeping them from being mean. That's the only way I can go about it. You know, 'That's inappropriate to call somebody that. That's not nice.' But then I'm saying being called gay is an insult. It's hard.

Unless it affects them directly, students usually show very little interest in a teacher's personal life; however, students do respond to good teaching and student response is usually the measure of a teacher's own success. The women in this study perceived themselves to be successful teachers. However, the four of the nine women I interviewed had been previously

married, living in a "normal" relationship as dictated by "heteronomativity." All four felt that their actual teaching style was influenced by being "out" as a lesbian. They regretted a failure of any relationship, heterosexual or otherwise, but all indicated that acknowledgment of being a lesbian brought a more positive teacher to their classroom and their students.

> Scout- I would say I'm a different teacher because I have much more focus for my students now. You know, if a kid comes in to me and says, "I want to talk to you about my life. I'm gay." I can have a kid hysterically crying in my room, and if I stand there and listen to them, will someone think I'm recruiting them? I think about the danger I put myself in, but at the same time, how can I not listen to this kid sitting there crying in my room? I mean, the incidence of teenage suicides among gays kids is ridiculously large compared to straight kids and near attempts and stuff like that. So, I just kind of bite the inside of my cheeks and go, [sigh] "OK, this will be fine. I'm not going to worry about my career. I'm going to worry about the person in front of me the most." That's probably the hardest thing.

It is impossible to say whether the students actually detected a change in her style or effectiveness as an educator, but perception is the reality for the viewer, so in Scout's eyes, she is a different teacher. Since her initial interview Scout became a runner-up for county "teacher of the year" and has become nationally board certified, so her perception gave her the confidence to attain the reality.

All the teachers in this study recognized students who were gay or lesbians, most often not understanding why they felt confused or out of place. These educators felt that they knew exactly "what the problem was" with these students but were not able to covey to them what these student were unable to articulate. Teachers were both frustrated and empathetic to the current and future pain suffered by their students. They also knew the potential of life-threatening danger that each of these students possessed, based upon their own experience.

> Gita- Yeah, [I've had gay students] and they later in life have told me that they knew I was gay. And a couple of them say that I helped preventing them from committing suicide. And so that was really rewarding and I've heard from some of these guys now, they've grown up and they're in their thirties and some are professionals and they say that I saved their lives.

In addition to impacting their teaching style, being a lesbian educator has influenced these teachers to supplement the information in their textbooks, particularly in the fields of history, literature, and science at the higher level grades, 8-12. While these teachers have not necessarily gone out of their way to point out every gay and lesbian character in history and literature, the possibilities have not been denied.

> Doris- I would have not taught something comfortably that I teach now with women in history that are clearly such dykes, Sarah Samson Milliman in the American Revolution who dressed as a man so she could fight in the war. I'm comfortable talking about her and nobody asks, 'What was her deal?' I mean kids don't say "gay" or "fag" in my class anymore. That's a non-issue. I put an end to that. But if it ever comes up, I say, "That term is insensitive to use if it's in a derogatory way." Because I have kids who have gay parents, to protect them. So I'm comfortable with a lot of subject matter. I would say any time that I have to talk about anything that has any value attached to it.

Surprisingly, discussion of being gay begins at a very early age for some students and lesbian teachers are faced with how to address homosexuality as early as first grade. Generally, in the form of name-calling, young students are using the language without understanding the concept, because a relationship rather than sexuality is the basis of their world. The lesbian teacher is faced with the dilemma of whether to give a cursory, censored explanation on why a student cannot arbitrarily call someone "gay" as an insult, or ignore the issue altogether.

> Lyric- I make sure that we deal with it when they call each other names. ...But in my classroom we don't call people names. We don't judge people." And that's what I teach in my classroom. And then I tell them, "You may know somebody that is, and you have no idea who they are." And I leave it at that, because they're working with somebody every day that is.

When teachers discussed first graders using derogatory language in reference to gays and lesbians, the obvious question arises, "Then what can you possibly discuss about this that would be appropriate in the classroom at this age level?" Maggie and Lyric suggested a number of guided class discussions that were relevant to the standard curriculum.

> Maggie- I think one of the main things is to start early. Start in first grade. Start with alternative type families. One of the things they do in first grade, they discuss the family

> structure. There are many ways the family can be structured. Part of that is letting them see that families are groups of people who love each other, if they care for each other.
>
> Lyric- One of the things we did when we talked about families, I would draw my family. And that was not my biological family…We talk about alternative families in my classroom.

A teacher's style, resources, and skills are her tools as an educator. How she utilizes these tools defines her success. The lesbian teachers in this study all felt that they had the expertise in their subject matters to successfully perform their jobs at an optimum level. However, they also felt that because they were lesbians, not only did they work even harder to excel and stand out among their colleagues for their exceptional teaching practices, but they also had the extra sensitivity to reach their students personally when others were unable to really understand what the student was experiencing. Figure 3 characterizes all the "lived" experiences of these teachers in their responses to the interview questions.

The primary change in perception must begin with the lesbian teacher herself. This change will not occur until she has allowed herself to move through each step of the coming out process which will guide her past previously embraced cultural hegemony to an understanding and acceptance of her own culture, resulting in profound personal change that will affect professional change. This does not imply that a lesbian teacher who is closeted cannot be a good teacher, possessing the positive attributes that are generally accepted by colleagues and students. However, by remaining closeted, students and colleagues will not be given the chance to realize that they know a good teacher who just happens to be a lesbian.

As both purveyors of social norms and champions of diversity within the classroom, the teachers in this research felt that they had the opportunity to responsibly guide students towards an understanding of the similarities in people from diverse cultures.

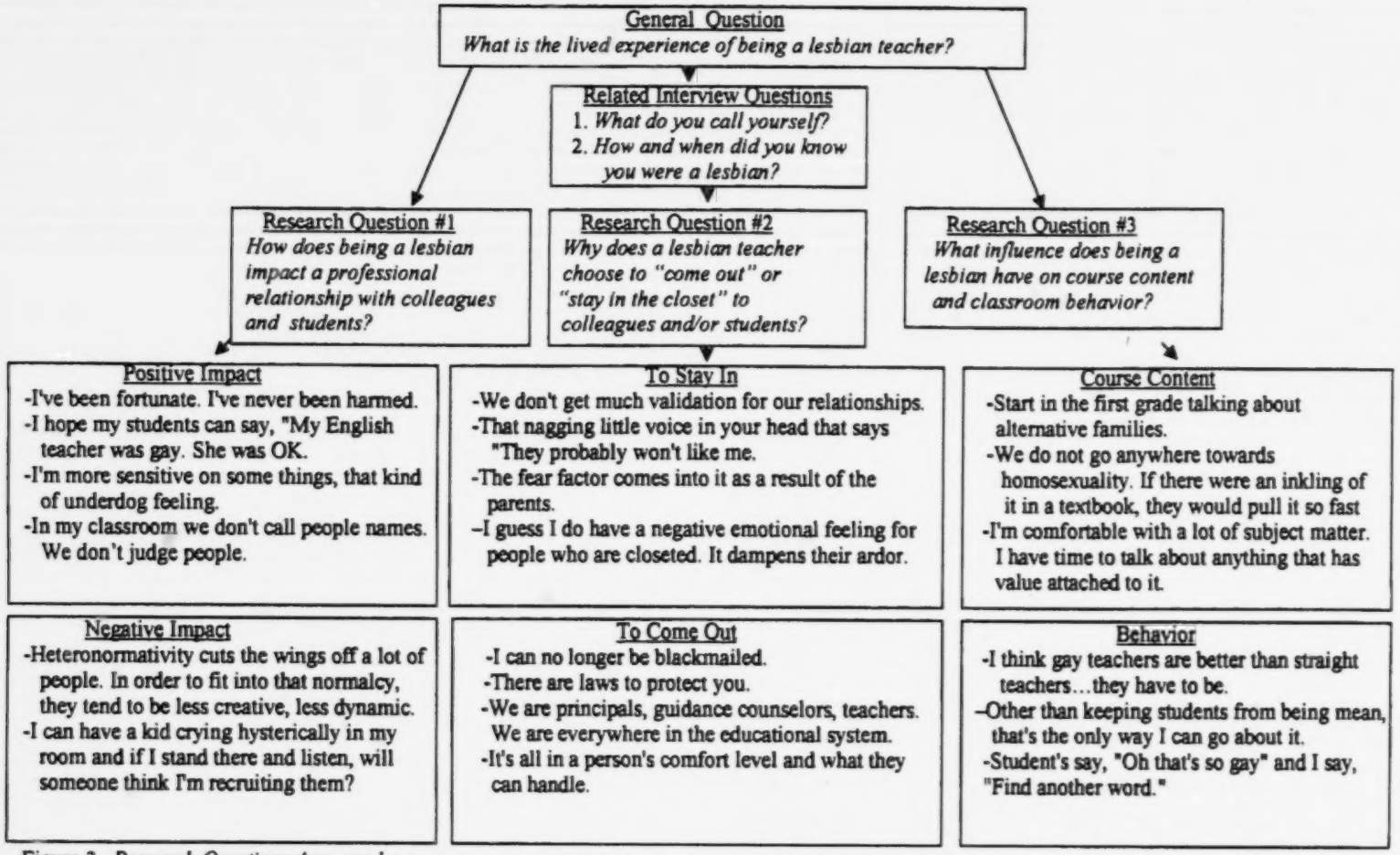
General Question
What is the lived experience of being a lesbian teacher?
Related Interview Questions
1. What do you call yourself?
2. How and when did you know you were a lesbian?
Research Question #1
How does being a lesbian impact a professional relationship with colleagues and students?
Research Question #2
Why does a lesbian teacher choose to "come out" or "stay in the closet" to colleagues and/or students?
Research Question #3
What influence does being a lesbian have on course content and classroom behavior?
Positive Impact
-I've been fortunate. I've never been harmed.
-I hope my students can say, "My English teacher was gay. She was OK.
-I'm more sensitive on some things, that kind of underdog feeling.
-In my classroom we don't call people names. We don't judge people.
To Stay In
-We don't get much validation for our relationships.
-That nagging little voice in your head that says "They probably won't like me.
-The fear factor comes into it as a result of the parents.
–I guess I do have a negative emotional feeling for people who are closeted. It dampens their ardor.
Course Content
-Start in the first grade talking about alternative families.
-We do not go anywhere towards homosexuality. If there were an inkling of it in a textbook, they would pull it so fast
-I'm comfortable with a lot of subject matter. I have time to talk about anything that has value attached to it.
Negative Impact
-Heteronormativity cuts the wings off a lot of people. In order to fit into that normalcy, they tend to be less creative, less dynamic.
-I can have a kid crying hysterically in my room and if I stand there and listen, will someone think I'm recruiting them?
To Come Out
-I can no longer be blackmailed.
-There are laws to protect you.
-We are principals, guidance counselors, teachers. We are everywhere in the educational system.
-It's all in a person's comfort level and what they can handle.
Behavior
-I think gay teachers are better than straight teachers…they have to be.
–Other than keeping students from being mean, that's the only way I can go about it.
-Student's say, "Oh that's so gay" and I say, "Find another word."

Figure 3. *Research Questions Answered*

Such understanding may lead to future acceptance of not only the gay/lesbian culture, but others as well, resulting in shifting perceptions in cultural hegemony.

The results of this study showed that personal acceptance of being a lesbian, shared with the acknowledgement, rather than compliance or defiance, of cultural hegemony can allow the lesbian educator to enhance her curriculum to characterize all people and create a classroom climate that will foster understanding and even generate social change among colleagues, parents, and students, one person at a time.

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